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Reagan's Judgment

By David W. Belin

DES MOINES — Throughout his campaign, President Carter has tried to tar Ronald Reagan as a warmonger. My experience with Governor Reagan leads me to the opposite conclusion.

I think it is particularly appropriate to examine Mr. Reagan's role in a Federal agency that dealt with issues of war and peace: his service in 1975 as a member of the "blue ribbon" commission appointed by Gerald R. Ford to investigate charges in the news media that the Central Intelligence Agency had, by conducting illegal activities within the United States, violated the rights of private citizens.

President Ford appointed Vice President Nelson A. Rockefeller as chairman and me as executive director of what became known as the Rockefeller Commission.

Mr. Reagan had been classified as a strict conservative by the news media but at times his views were far less strict than Mr. Rockefeller's.

In January 1975, I had uncovered facts showing that the C.I.A. had been involved in plots to assassinate foreign leaders in peacetime. After I developed the initial background information, I reported my preliminary findings to the commissioners. There was an immediate controversy in the commission. Mr. Ford's order establishing the commission declared that "the Commission shall ascertain and evaluate any facts relating to activities conducted within the United States by the Central Intelligence Agency which give rise to questions of compliance with the provisions" of the law establishing the C.I.A.

On the surface, it appeared that assassination plots directed against foreign leaders were not within the scope of our investigation because the Presidential order referred to activities "conducted within the United States." This was the position taken by Mr. Rockefeller.

The planning of a murder by two or more persons in and of itself is an unlawful conspiracy, even though the murder may never take place. I believed that to the extent that the C.I.A. brought in organized-crime figures within the United States this gave us jurisdiction, because it involved a conspiracy that took place in America.

Despite a persuasive Rockefeller presentation, Mr. Reagan took the broader position that these facts must be fully investigated. A majority of the other members joined him in this view.

Another major difference between Mr. Reagan and Mr. Rockefeller arose in the early stages of the investigation.

the commission's work for at least five years. As a matter of principle, I felt it was unwise in advance to seal the lips of participants in an investigation of this kind. There were major issues of free speech involved (subject to limitations imposed on access to classified information).

Mr. Reagan did not attend all of the meetings where this issue was discussed because, unlike the other members, he had to commute 3,000 miles to attend the regularly scheduled Monday meetings. However, when he was not there, he requested briefings, and I was able to keep him advised on all key questions. After a briefing on the alternatives, Mr. Reagan concurred that no five-year moratorium rule should be imposed. Ultimately, this view prevailed.

This does not mean that Mr. Reagan and I always had the same point of view. But even in those situations where we disagreed, I generally found that if Mr. Reagan was adequately briefed on the facts and the alternatives, he was not prone to rash conclusions. I also found that he made important contributions in helping resolve differences in a group of strong-minded people.

In commission meetings, as well as in private conversations, matters relating to war and peace were discussed. In almost all situations, the views of Mr. Reagan and Mr. Rockefeller were remarkably similar. They both greatly distrusted the Soviet Union. They both had great concern about the declining relative capability of American defense forces. They both believed that maintaining the peace required a major strengthening of our armed forces. They both agreed that an effective intelligence agency was one of the most important ingredients for helping maintain the peace.

Although Mr. Reagan was most concerned about America's military strength, I did not find any basis for categorizing him as a warmonger.

My experience in Washington confirmed my belief that a President's judgment is no better than his information. It is the presentations and recommendations of his closest advisers that ultimately will have the greatest influence on his judgment in determining major policy decisions, including issues of war and peace.

David W. Belin, a lawyer, supported Senator Howard H. Baker Jr. for President this year and has written strategy papers for Ronald Reagan. "I